

Political scientists report on ethnic/racial aspects of Taser use by Houston police

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A new report co-authored by Rice political scientists Mark Jones and William Reed with colleagues at the University of Houston finds patterns and/or aberrations in the use of Tasers related to ethnicity, gender, race and geography.

The report, titled "A Statistical Analysis of the Use of Conducted Energy Devices by the Houston Police Department," constitutes one section of a larger report, "Conducted Energy Device Program Performance Audit," released by the city of Houston's controller. The report sought to answer several questions about Tasers, also called conducted energy devices or CEDs, including: Who is subject to being shocked by a Taser? What are the demographic characteristics of suspects and officers in these events? And where have these incidents occurred?

The study, based on data from December 2004 to June 2007, found Houston police officers were more likely to use Tasers on African-American suspects than on Latino or Anglo suspects. Of 1,417 Taser deployments by officers during that time frame, nearly 67 percent were used on black suspects, the study reported. About 25 percent of Houston's population is black.

In addition to determining the incidence of who was shocked by Tasers, the researchers looked at who was doing the shocking. "African-American officers were significantly less likely to use their CED than Anglo and Latino officers," the report stated. "The explanation for this observation most likely hinges on a complex set of factors related to the

way in which the suspect interacted/responded to the officer and in which the officer interacted/responded to the suspect."

The report also noted, "Latino suspects were somewhat more likely to be subjected to a CED deployment than Anglo suspects. This difference was modest and driven primarily by the greater tendency of Latino officers to utilize their CED when a suspect was Latino, compared to when the suspect was an Anglo."

Finally, "the results from the CED analysis suggest that certain combinations of officer and suspect characteristics resulted in an increased probability of CED utilization," the report stated. "Depending on how the race of the officer and the race of the suspect were paired, it was possible to see significant increases and decreases in the rate of CED utilization."

Source: Rice University

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